



Birder Certification Improves Data Reliability

High-quality long-term monitoring depends on reliable people with outstanding skills. Identifying birds by their voice alone is a tall order, but doing so during a morning chorus, within a certain number of minutes, and while estimating how far each singer is from where you stand is a challenge accepted by a select few people.

Studies have found that observer skill level influences the number of individual birds recorded during surveys, but that skill level improves with appropriate training. To ensure that the people doing songbird surveys in the Great Lakes Network parks are up to the task, we require they be tested using the *Birder Certification Online program*.

This interactive testing website uses photos and recordings collected in regional habitats to test observers' ability to identify birds by sight and sound. Observers obtain certification specific to a Bird Conservation Region, of which there are three in the Great Lakes Network (see map in screenshot above).

Observers can use practice sessions on the site to prepare for the certification test, or use any number of CDs that are commercially available. The website provides links to online bird quizzes, online bird guides, and recommended field guides and audio CDs.

Our goal is for people doing surveys in the Great Lakes parks to be at least a Level 2 observer. In 2016, six of the nine network parks had at least one observer certified at this level. The others, while not formally certified, have contributed to other surveys and are known to be outstanding birders. Tools like the Birder Certification Online website can help them stay sharp and help reduce the variables in our long-term monitoring data. ●

Birder Certification Online, www.birdercertification.org/, was developed at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay with input from multiple agencies including the NPS Great Lakes Network. Observers obtain certification specific to a Bird Conservation Region (colored/numbered areas in the above map).

Birder Certification Levels

Level 1 birder can visually identify typical backyard birds and at least some of the common species found in natural habitats (grassland, wetland, forest), but has a minimal ability to identify birds by song or calls. In fact, there is no audio test given at this certification level.

Level 2 birder is an experienced observer who can visually identify 90% or all the birds in this region without the help of a field guide, and can identify no less than 50% of the most familiar bird songs and calls.

Level 3 birder can completely and accurately survey birds and provide high quality, scientifically rigorous data. They can identify 90% of species by sight and 80% of species by song or call.